

# The Drawdown Asymmetry

## Why Ground Forces Will Depart Iraq but Air Forces Will Stay

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### The Language of Iraq Strategy

The common language used to describe Iraq often obscures reality. Nowhere is this more evident than in the descriptions of the “surge strategy.” Some assert that the surge is not really a strategy at all because it focuses on the *means* employed in Iraq and ignores the *ways* and *ends* of coalition policy there.<sup>1</sup> Others argue that the surge strategy did, in fact, include a modification of the *ends* (political reconciliation was identified as a key goal, and multiple, measurable benchmarks were proposed to guide the Iraqi political process) as well as the *ways* (coalition troops established multiple joint security stations where they, along with their Iraqi counterparts, lived among the people they were responsible for securing).<sup>2</sup> The element that attracted the lion’s share of the attention, however, was the increase in the *means*, specifically the addition of thousands of US ground forces into Iraq.

While many elements of combat power have increased in and around Iraq over the past year—including sea, air, and space power—both public officials and members of the media have described the increase in military force almost exclusively in terms of major ground units.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the most common description of the surge highlights the increase in brigade combat teams (BCT) from 15 to 20.<sup>4</sup> The current debate over Iraq strategy centers on the questions of when, and how rapidly, forces will be reduced in Iraq, and it continues to revolve around major ground units. It seems likely that this trend will continue. Discussions of when and how the US

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Army BCTs will leave Iraq will dominate the discourse about the coalition’s future in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

For all of the discussion about force levels and combat units in Iraq, it is surprising that one important aspect of the coming drawdown has not been discussed widely—until now. While major ground units will soon begin leaving without replacement, air units in the region cannot do so. Air forces must stay behind to protect and support the coalition forces that remain. They must also control and protect the sovereign airspace over Iraq, as the Iraqi air force is many years away from being able to do this. Over time, this will manifest itself in a *drawdown asymmetry* that will have weighty implications for coalition policy in Iraq as well as for the long-term health of the organizations tasked to provide these air forces, chiefly the US Air Force. Ultimately, the consequences may manifest themselves in such a way that the term *drawdown asymmetry* will become a key element of the language used to discuss Iraq strategy.

## **Major Ground Units Must Leave**

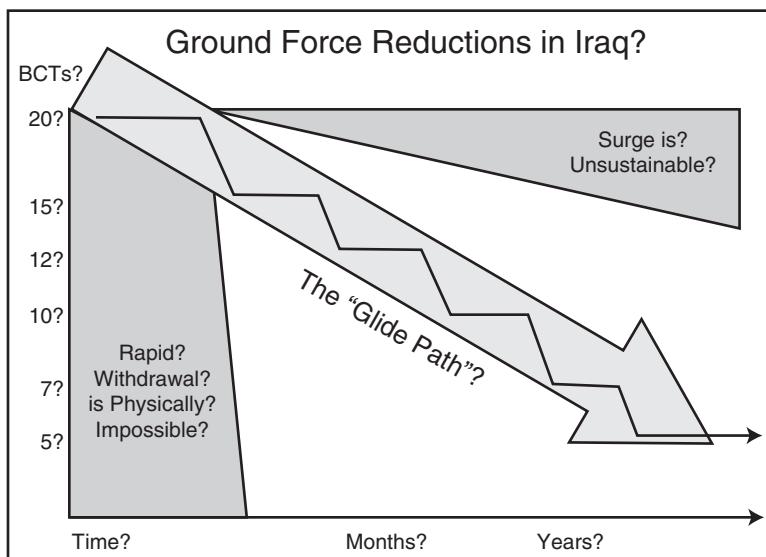
Major ground units are leaving Iraq, and they will not be replaced. Those knowledgeable with the current state of the US Army and the Marine Corps realize this was inevitable.<sup>6</sup> The two services could not sustain the required level of effort much longer without incurring unacceptable risks to the health of their forces. Prior to implementing the surge, the Army and Marine Corps faced significant challenges in the areas of deployment scheduling, recruiting, retention, and equipment. As early as 2004, some were describing the Army as “broken.”<sup>7</sup> The years that followed saw increased pressures placed on units as their tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan were extended routinely, and their recovery time was cut short. When the surge added more stress to this baseline, the challenges grew considerably.<sup>8</sup> Maj Gen Michael L. Oates, commander of the 10th Mountain Division, describes the current situation in this way: “[Our soldiers] are also very tired. A 15-month tour is very difficult on soldiers and on families, especially if you’re on your second or third tour. The strain on soldiers and their families is not cumulative, it is exponential.”<sup>9</sup>

The stress on the Army and Marine Corps is unsustainable over the long run. Coalition leaders, including the president, always intended these policies to be a short-term approach to increase security in order to buy time for the political process to improve. While the surge in military forces appears to have mitigated the sectarian violence that has gripped Iraq since the bombing of

the Golden Mosque in Samara in early 2006, progress on the political front has been painfully slow.<sup>10</sup> It now appears that Iraqi politicians will have until summer of 2008 to take advantage of the temporary surge in troops. By then, the surge will have pushed the ground forces to their limits, and ground forces will continue coming home.

## **But the United States Must Stay Involved in Iraq**

Some call for an “immediate” exit from Iraq, and others argue that the surge is working and should continue. The only meaningful question, however, regarding ground force levels is determining the best plan to attain a sustainable force level until the coalition is ready to leave. This plan must avoid extremes. Just as current force levels are unsustainable, the United States cannot withdraw forces abruptly—there are numerous physical limits to preparing and transporting the equipment and people.<sup>11</sup> Any feasible plan will withdraw forces over a significant period such that a graph depicting force levels versus time will resemble a glide path (see fig. 1).



**Figure 1. The Withdrawal “Glide Path.”** (Adapted from House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees, “Charts to Accompany the Testimony of GEN David H. Petraeus,” *Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq*, prepared by Gen David H. Petraeus, commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq, 10–11 September 2007, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Petraeus-Testimony-Slides20070910.pdf>.) This figure uses the same force levels and ambiguous timeline General Petraeus presented (see fig. 2).

At some point on this glide path, the United States will reach a ground force level that is physically sustainable in the long term (i.e., the United States can keep the forces in the field at moderate cost in terms of lives, finances, and opportunity costs to other missions and global commitments). Once physical sustainment is possible, political sustainment in Washington, DC, becomes possible as well. It is at this point that the next major Iraq debate will take place, as politicians and their advisors ask, should the United States see the operation in Iraq through to a logical conclusion or cut its losses? In other words, should we stay or should we go?

The most likely answer is that the United States will stay. Once US ground force levels in Iraq are both physically and politically sustainable, the United States is most likely to conclude that as long as the central government of Iraq is weak, continued engagement is preferable to complete withdrawal. There are several reasons for this. First, an Iraq with no US forces in place will probably descend into chaos. During his testimony to Congress, General Petraeus cited the conclusions of a Defense Intelligence Agency report addressing the consequences of a rapid withdrawal from Iraq:

A rapid withdrawal would result in the further release of the strong centrifugal forces in Iraq and produce a number of dangerous results, including a high risk of disintegration of the Iraqi Security Forces; rapid deterioration of local security initiatives; al Qaeda-Iraq regaining lost ground and freedom of maneuver; a marked increase in violence and further ethno-sectarian displacement and refugee flows; alliances of convenience by Iraqi groups with internal and external forces to gain advantages over their rivals; and exacerbation of already challenging regional dynamics, especially with respect to Iran.<sup>12</sup>

This report makes the case that a failed Iraqi state is a prime candidate to provide sanctuary and strategic bases for transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. An Iraqi state in chaos would be advantageous for al-Qaeda as it would offer the group a large Islamic population in which to hide, relatively easy access to transportation and lines of communication, and large numbers of potential recruits. In today's global security environment, any failed state with a large Islamic population is a threat to become a hotbed for terrorism. Iraq is no exception, and it is not in the United States' or coalition's interest to walk away from Iraq and allow al-Qaeda free access.<sup>13</sup> This is a major reason why coalition nations are likely to keep forces in (or near) Iraq for many years to come.

In addition to offering sanctuary for transnational terrorist groups, an Iraq in chaos is fertile ground for Iran to extend its influence over large areas of Iraq, including areas that contain large oil fields. Iran is undoubtedly

exerting itself in Iraq today. General Petraeus described this in his testimony: “It is increasingly apparent to both Coalition and Iraqi leaders that Iran, through the use of the Qods Force, seeks to turn the Iraqi Special Groups into a Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces in Iraq.”<sup>14</sup> A total withdrawal would leave this activity unchecked—not a good outcome for the United States or many of its coalition partners.

While the United States is not profiting directly from the war in Iraq, there are strong economic reasons to stay engaged there, and the chief consideration is the oil market. US oil imports from Iraq comprise only a small percentage of the total, but oil supplies are so tight that any disruptions in supply can have major repercussions for the global market.<sup>15</sup> Even though the coalition actively protects Iraq’s oil infrastructure, there have been hundreds of insurgent attacks on pipelines, pumping stations, and other components.<sup>16</sup> Iraqi oil production is a key component of the supply provided by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and analysts believe this production will rise over the next year.<sup>17</sup> Analysts have already factored these expectations into their market forecasts, and sudden shocks to oil supply, even if only in the short term, could result in price spikes that have the potential to affect the global economy for months to years. In addition, oil revenues are critical for the continued progress of the Iraqi government, and this gives the government’s enemies ample reason to continue attacks on oil infrastructure. Remaining engaged in Iraq is the best way to minimize this risk.

In addition to protecting US and coalition interests, there are several other reasons for staying engaged there. First, some make a strong moral argument that the United States should not walk away from Iraq. From a security and economic standpoint, many Iraqis are worse off today than they were under the Hussein regime. Many believe that the United States has an obligation to stay until Iraqis enjoy a decent opportunity for a better future. As James Dobbins comments, “Having toppled Saddam Hussein and dismantled his government, the United States has assumed weighty responsibilities for about 28 million people whom we cannot in good conscience shirk.”<sup>18</sup> Anthony Cordesman agrees when he writes that by invading Iraq, the United States put “28 million lives at risk and is morally responsible for the outcome.”<sup>19</sup> Second, the United States has invested a great amount of emotional energy in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of US citizens, from the lowest-ranking soldiers to the most senior officials, have forged personal relationships with Iraqi people—walking away from them

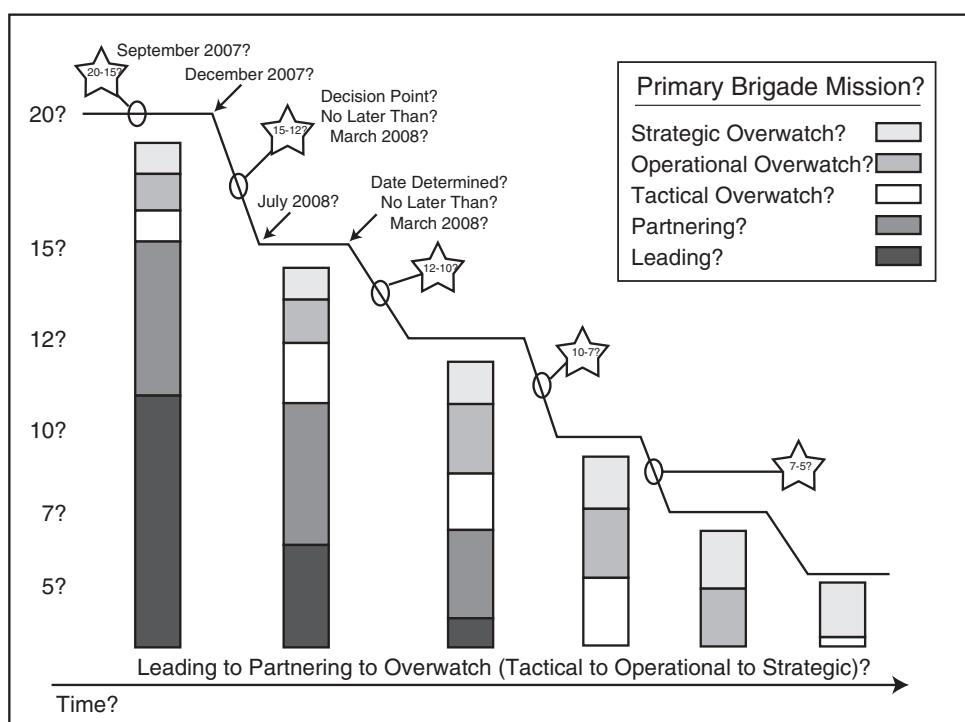
will be emotionally difficult. As an example, Marine gunnery sergeant Terry Walker, an instructor who trains Iraqi security forces, expresses his frustration at the suggestion that coalition forces would leave Iraq, “Are you telling me that after five years, we would cut the fish loose as soon as we got him to the boat?”<sup>20</sup> Third, historical analogies are important to policy makers, and the most easily available analogy is the US withdrawal from South Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> As many perceive this as a mistake, it will bolster the argument to continue the US involvement in Iraq.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the best line of reasoning for a rapid withdrawal from Iraq is that continued involvement is a strategic overcommitment that jeopardizes US interests in other areas of the world. In the absence of a clear threat, however, this argument is unlikely to hold sway. For all of these reasons, the United States is likely to remain engaged in Iraq for many years to come, albeit with a much smaller ground force.

### **Transitioning From “Go Big” to “Go Long”**

With the ongoing redeployment of ground forces, a major shift is underway from a short-term surge to a significantly smaller force that is sustainable in the long term. At least one Pentagon planning group predicted this shift. In late 2006, as the Bush administration searched for a new direction in Iraq, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Peter Pace, formed a policy advisory group that identified three main options in Iraq. The advisory group concluded that the United States could send more troops to try and break the cycle of sectarian violence (nicknamed the “go big” option), withdraw troops and transition to a long-term training and advisory function (“go long”), or withdraw all forces from Iraq (“go home”). In addition, the group identified a hybrid plan dubbed, “Go big but short while transitioning to go long.” This option included a short-term buildup followed up by a drawdown to a sustainable force level.<sup>23</sup> It is now apparent that the United States is executing this option, and barring the unexpected, 2008 will be the year where the transition from “go big” to “go long” will take place.

The “go long” force will be much smaller than the surge force that is in Iraq today, and its mission will fundamentally change. In his testimony to Congress, General Petraeus summarized this shift in the title for his recommendation for Iraq’s future: “Security While Transitioning: From Leading to Partnering to Overwatch.”<sup>24</sup> He also depicted this simulta-

neous drawdown and transition in his slide titled “Recommended Force Reductions and Mission Shift” (see fig. 2). While the majority of coalition forces are currently “in the lead” when conducting counterinsurgency missions, the slide depicts how they will eventually step aside and let Iraqi units do this for themselves. As an interim step, many major ground units have taken on a “partnering” role, where they pair up with an Iraqi unit.<sup>25</sup> These partner units conduct joint operations, with the coalition unit assuming a mentoring role. Once the Iraqi units are ready to stand on their own, their partnered units will step aside. Instead of leaving altogether, however, some ground forces will stay in an “overwatch” role—they will be available to shore up the Iraqi units when contingencies arise, but they will increasingly be out of sight to the average Iraqi. General Petraeus’s planners have identified three levels of overwatch—tactical, operational,



**Figure 2. Recommended Force Reductions and Mission Shift.** (Reprinted from House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees, “Charts to Accompany the Testimony of GEN David H. Petraeus,” *Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq*, prepared by Gen David H. Petraeus, commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq, 10–11 September 2007, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Petraeus-Testimony-Slides20070910.pdf>.)

and strategic—corresponding to the level of oversight required and the rapidity at which the coalition unit could respond if needed.

It is interesting to note what General Petraeus’s slide does not show—it does not depict a complete exit from Iraq. According to this plan, the withdrawal of US ground forces stops at five BCTs. These remaining BCTs will serve two major functions. First, they will be available to conduct counterterrorism missions in Iraq (and beyond, if necessary). Second, they will be present in case things go poorly for specific Iraqi units or for the Iraqi government in general. In order to accomplish these two functions, not all of these BCTs will need to be in Iraq, but it certainly appears that some of them will.

While major ground units appear to be poised to draw down to a sustainable level, another type of military unit will increase dramatically over the next few years. These small units are the transition teams—the key link to successful training for Iraqi forces. These teams typically consist of 11–15 members, each of whom brings key specialties to the team such as intelligence, logistics, and communications.<sup>26</sup> Transition teams embed within their assigned Iraqi unit, and their role is to advise, coach, and mentor these units, especially through interaction with the Iraqi unit commanders.<sup>27</sup> Transition teams also act as the link to key aspects of coalition support, including intelligence, fires, and medical evacuation.<sup>28</sup> Transition teams come in several varieties, depending on the type of Iraqi unit they support. For example, there are military transition teams assigned to Iraqi army units, border transition teams assigned to border security forces, special police transition teams assigned to Iraqi police units, and air transition teams for the Iraqi air force.<sup>29</sup>

The US Army has made a tremendous investment in training transition teams, devoting an entire brigade (the 1st BCT of the 1st Infantry Division based at Fort Riley, Kansas) to the task of organizing, equipping, training, and supporting transition teams.<sup>30</sup> This unit is currently preparing numerous transition teams for service in Iraq. As additional transition teams deploy, they will travel with their assigned units and operate throughout the country. The result will be that, as major ground units consolidate in central bases outside the major population centers (and most leave Iraq altogether), scores of transition teams will disperse throughout Iraq.

Despite their importance, there has been remarkably little discussion in the debate over Iraq policy about the roles, capabilities, and vulnerabilities of the transition teams as compared to the major ground units, especially the Army

BCTs. Another form of military power—airpower—will be critical for these transition teams’ safety and effectiveness, but it has been absent from the discussion as well. This will soon change, however, as policy makers realize that while major ground units can come home, the air units in Iraq cannot.

## **Major Air Units Must Stay**

Unless the coalition is prepared to accept major risks to both its forces and objectives in Iraq, the air forces currently supporting operations there, with a few exceptions, must stay in place. There are two central reasons for this. First, coalition airpower is necessary to support and protect the ground forces that remain, especially the dispersed transition teams. Second, coalition air forces are necessary to control, protect, and defend the airspace above Iraq. Failure to ensure the safety of coalition forces or the sovereignty of Iraq’s airspace would have such severe consequences that decision makers will conclude that air forces cannot leave at the same rate as ground forces. This drawdown asymmetry is likely to continue until the transition teams stand down and the Iraqi air force stands up.

### **Support and Protection for Coalition Forces**

As long as significant numbers of coalition ground forces are present in Iraq, they will need the support and protection that airpower provides. They will need airlift to move people and supplies both into and around the battlespace. They will need the above-ground perspective provided by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, as well as numerous other assets such as fighters equipped with advanced targeting pods. They will need lethal effects provided by fighters, bombers, unmanned aerial vehicles, or attack helicopters to engage the enemy when necessary. They will need combat search and rescue to recover isolated personnel, and they will need access to aeromedical evacuation in case of life-threatening injuries. They will need airborne platforms to relay critical communications (as they must overcome chronic shortfalls in their communications equipment). Today, airpower provides important—and at times essential—effects throughout Iraq. As the mission endures, the need for these effects will remain. Consequently, air forces must stay.

This is true despite the fact that there will be fewer ground forces to support, and the amount of support required will decrease. There are two key reasons for this. First, Iraq is a large country, and the tyranny of dis-

tance drives air and space solutions to the problems of logistics, fires, and communication. This is especially applicable to the dispersed transition teams. These small teams will operate across Iraq in unpredictable ways as they mentor and train their Iraqi partners. Due to their small numbers and lack of heavy equipment, they will be vulnerable, and airpower is their insurance policy. The transition teams must have the ability to rely on logistical support through airlift and airdrop. If things go poorly and their units get into trouble, they will need to be able to call for lethal effects through close air support (CAS). Depending on their communications equipment, they may need persistent communications relay from the air. The requirement, therefore, from an air strategist’s perspective, does not depend on the amount of support required as much as it does on the acceptable coverage in terms of distance and the response window in terms of time.

Two examples help illustrate the challenge of covering all of Iraq in a reasonable time with airpower. Regarding airlift, even if the needed supplies are relatively modest in volume, the dispersal of the transition teams will mean that logisticians must develop a complex system to support all of the teams. While ground transport will be a major part of the solution, it is reasonable to conclude that sizeable numbers of airframes will be required to make this system both responsive and reliable. Responsiveness is an issue for lethal effects as well. When the transition teams call for CAS, they need it as soon as possible. This drives the requirement for significant numbers of airframes on ground or airborne alert. Even though coalition forces may need only a small number of fighters at any one time, the possibility that the need may arise anywhere from Basra to Mosul drives the requirement for a complex system—one that will rely on numerous fighters on ground alert at multiple bases and/or airborne alert at multiple holding points. It is unlikely that a system could meet this requirement for coverage with significantly less airpower than is in Iraq today.

In addition to the requirements for coverage and responsiveness, the demand for airborne ISR will remain high, even as major ground units leave. A characteristic of counterinsurgency operations is an insatiable demand for intelligence. This is certainly true in Iraq. It is common for coalition forces to conduct operations for the primary purpose of gaining intelligence.<sup>31</sup> While much of the most reliable intelligence in counterinsurgency operations comes from person-to-person interaction (human intelligence), military commanders have found that the above-ground perspective is critical to success. Commanders use information gained

from airborne sensors to build pattern-of-life information on potential bad actors, observe high-threat areas such as roads and base perimeters, create products that help them plan out future operations, and maintain situational awareness of both friendly and enemy actions during battle.

The most influential thinkers in both the Army and Marine Corps believe that airborne sensors should be responsive to the needs of commanders at the lowest levels.<sup>32</sup> Every day, requests from low-level commanders for ISR support flood into the Central Command Air Forces' air operations center. Unfortunately, there are not enough assets to fill all of these requests (in fact, to respond to this demand, some ISR systems have been deployed at a rate that is unsustainable, and this is discussed later in this article). This is especially true of platforms that provide full-motion video—continuous video that acts much like a security camera in the sky.<sup>33</sup> Even if major ground units leave and their requests for ISR decrease accordingly, the transition teams are likely to continue asking for ISR support for many years to come. Operations throughout the Middle East, especially in Iraq, are going to continue to pull a disproportionate amount of airborne ISR assets from the national pool. Except for the systems that are on the verge of breaking, these assets will need to stay.

### **Controlling and Protecting Iraq's Airspace**

In addition to meeting the support requirements for ground forces that remain in Iraq, there is another reason why air forces cannot leave. For the time being, coalition air forces must control and protect Iraq's sovereign airspace. Airspace control in Iraq is an extremely complex activity, as air controllers must strike a balance between ongoing military operations and civilian air traffic. As an example, the air sector over Baghdad is one of the busiest in the world. At any moment, there may be a civilian airliner awaiting takeoff at Baghdad International Airport, a military airlift platform on final approach with a priority delivery of human blood, multiple helicopters transporting high-ranking officials, fighter aircraft performing CAS for a patrol in southern Baghdad, a communications relay platform positioned over the city for maximum coverage, international civilian traffic transiting over Iraq, and scores of ISR platforms—both manned and unmanned—feeding the appetite for intelligence information. Add in the complexity of deconflicting artillery fire with aircraft and you have one of the most challenging air control problems in history. The USAF has dedicated a large contingent of air controllers (with expensive radar and

communications equipment) to Iraq, and they will not be coming home anytime soon.<sup>34</sup>

The same is true for those responsible for defending Iraq’s sovereign airspace. Iraq is in a strategic position, both literally and figuratively. It is a historic center of political power in the Middle East, and this history remains important to people in the region. It contains the world’s most volatile nexus of Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish populations. It possesses large reserves of strategic resources, including oil, which continue to grow in value as demand increases. Its eastern border is a physical manifestation of the deep divide between the Arab and Persian peoples. The world’s most active Islamist terrorist groups view it as the critical front in their war against the West. Civilian airlines and transport services use its airspace extensively as an aerial trade route (and they pay sizeable fees for this privilege). Iraq is valuable, and many covet the ability to exert influence within the country.

Another interesting fact is that every one of Iraq’s neighbors owns a relatively modern air force. Iran and Syria operate modern Soviet-style fighters. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and Israel all possess modern fighters made in the United States. In addition, several of these air forces have experience fighting in Iraq’s airspace.

If the coalition were to leave Iraq with no credible air defense, Iraq may or may not be attacked through the air in coming years. It is very likely, however, that its neighbors would attempt to coerce the Iraqi government by leveraging their superior air capabilities. Even with coalition airpower in place, countries such as Turkey and Iran endeavor to coerce the Iraqi government, and Turkey has conducted air attacks into Iraq.<sup>35</sup> If countries are willing to threaten and conduct air incursions today—with coalition air forces in place—it is very likely that these threats will increase in the absence of a credible air deterrent. The Iraqi government cannot enjoy freedom of action unless its sovereign airspace is secure.

Defending Iraq’s airspace, however, is not a simple task. As stated earlier, Iraq is a large country, and air defense assets must operate throughout its territory to be credible. Defense forces need to react with a reasonable response time, and this requires a combination of surveillance posts, air bases, ground defense sites, and airborne assets. Some may assert that the coalition can defend Iraq’s airspace from bases outside of Iraq (such as in Kuwait), but this is unlikely to be totally effective as the reaction time required in certain scenarios (an Iranian incursion into northeast Iraq, for example) is so great that the

deterrent is not credible. This is especially true if situational awareness is low due to the lack of a comprehensive air picture.

Defending Iraq's airspace requires a considerable amount of military power inside Iraq with the capability and expertise to offer a credible air deterrent. These forces do not have to be dedicated air defense forces, although they could be. Multirole fighters, alternatively, could accomplish support missions for ground forces while maintaining the ability to intercept and engage hostile aircraft. This is how the coalition fields an air deterrent today, allowing it to meet multiple requirements with a smaller force. This force, however, must stay in place, or the Iraqi government will be open to coercion by its neighbors.

### **What about the Iraqi Air Force?**

The obvious question is, why can't the Iraqis control and protect their own airspace? After all, the Hussein regime possessed an air force that was capable of a wide spectrum of air missions. The need for major coalition air units to remain in place would largely evaporate if the Iraqi military possessed a capable air arm. The coalition, unfortunately, is still in the early stages of developing a new Iraqi air force. Compared to the progress made in building the Iraqi army, the Iraqi air force lags significantly behind, and this gap is growing. There are many reasons for this, and some of them deserve a brief mention.

The 1991 Gulf War, the intervening years of no-fly-zone enforcement, and the invasion of 2003 left the Iraqi air force completely devastated. With the exception of some air base infrastructure, almost nothing remained to build upon. In the invasion's aftermath, the coalition faced the daunting task of building a national air force from scratch. While many coalition members had experience in helping other nations develop their air forces, the coalition forces in general, and the US Air Force in particular, never developed a capability to conduct a project of this magnitude. At first, Airmen were overwhelmed at the scale of the task. Additionally, as the coalition organized itself for the post-invasion period, the task for rebuilding the Iraqi air force did not fall on the senior Airman in theater, who controlled the preponderance of air forces, nor was it given to Air Force special operations forces, who possessed significant expertise and experience in building indigenous air forces.<sup>36</sup> This task fell to the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq (also called MNSTC-I, pronounced min-stick-ee), the coalition organization responsible for standing up all of Iraq's military

forces.<sup>37</sup> MNSTC-I created an entirely new organization, called the Coalition Air Force Transition Team (or CAFTT, pronounced caff-tee), to oversee the creation of the Iraqi air force. This organization has taken some time to mature.<sup>38</sup> Added to this, for reasons that are justifiable, the coalition has always placed the top priority on developing Iraqi ground forces. At first, MNSTC-I dedicated almost all of the available resources to the stand-up of ground units. The result of all of this was a delayed start for the Iraqi air force. In its recent report, the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq describes the delay: "In 2004, the Iraqi Air Force had 35 people and possessed no aircraft. This meager beginning and late start as compared to the new Iraqi Army help put in context the progress the Air Force has made since then."<sup>39</sup>

There has been significant progress in building a capable air force for Iraq. A solid plan is in place, recruiting is up, training programs are ongoing, the budget is growing, and more aircraft are arriving. Unfortunately, it is going to be quite a while before the Iraqi air force is ready to operate independently. This is partially due to the late start mentioned above, but it is also because it simply takes longer to build capable air forces than it does ground forces. It takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to create the necessary logistics support systems and provide the required technical training. The Jones report explains it this way:

The delayed start up of the new Iraqi Air Force resulted in a considerable lag behind the Iraqi Army's current level of maturity. Moreover, the creation of effective operational, maintenance, and support systems for an air force, with its advanced technical requirements, demands a longer period of development. The net effect of this asymmetry is that Coalition support will likely be required for a longer period for the Iraqi Air Force than for the Army. Despite steady progress and its strong future potential, today's Iraqi Air Force is heavily reliant on Coalition forces for support and training; and though its capabilities are improving, it remains far from operational independence.<sup>40</sup>

The Iraqi air force and the CAFTT are currently concentrating their efforts on building the capacity to conduct missions that support counterinsurgency operations directly. These include ISR and air-transport capabilities. The ability to conduct attack missions in support of ground forces is still many months away, as the Iraqis have no fixed-wing aircraft and few helicopters capable of ground attack. The Iraqi air force is many years away from being able to deter incursions into its sovereign airspace.

Unless the coalition is willing to leave Iraq and assume the risks mentioned above, its air forces will have to stay in and around Iraq for many

years, even as major ground units go home. Eventually, the way out for these air forces is a viable Iraqi air force with the reliable equipment and trained personnel enabling it to support Iraqi ground forces and defend its airspace. In the meantime, coalition forces will shoulder the burden, and this will have major implications for policy in Iraq as well as for the organization most likely to assume the majority of this workload, the US Air Force.

## **Major Implications of the Drawdown Asymmetry**

The drawdown asymmetry will have major implications for the mission in Iraq as well as for the health of the air forces that must sustain the effort there. Some of these implications will be negative—they will increase the risk to the mission, people, and resources. Other implications may be positive—there could be opportunities to help the Iraqis and pursue coalition interests with a reduced footprint. The following discussion addresses these risks and opportunities. It focuses on the US Air Force because it seems likely that it will bear much of the burden of the drawdown asymmetry. This is still an open question, however, and the potential contribution of other services as well as partner nations is addressed in a subsequent section.

## **Risks**

The US Air Force is facing a crisis. Its inventory of aircraft is in critical condition, and the drawdown asymmetry will worsen the situation unless something fundamentally changes. While the soul of any military force is its people, Airmen rely on air and space platforms in a way that is necessarily different from ground forces. Without tanks and artillery pieces, there is still a US Army. Without airplanes and space platforms, there is no viable US Air Force.

On paper, the Air Force's aircraft are old. In reality, they are even older than the numbers show. It is a fact that military equipment wears out faster in the harsh environment and high operations tempo of the Middle East. The heat, sand, and wind combine to create one of the harshest climates on Earth, especially for high-tech equipment. All services are dealing with the consequences. Key pieces of US Army equipment, for example, are wearing out at “up to nine times the rate in times of peace.”<sup>41</sup> This is true for airplanes as well. The US Air Force deployed forces in reaction to Iraq’s

invasion of Kuwait in the fall of 1990, and it has been engaged in major combat operations in Iraq since the spring of 1991. During the last 17 years, its airplanes have flown at a much higher rate than was originally planned. Although the maintainers have done an excellent job in keeping them flying, they are exhibiting serious symptoms of chronic stress. It is common for Airmen to fly, and for soldiers and Marines to trust their lives to, airplanes that have known defects such as cracks in the wings or risky imperfections in the engines. “This can’t go on,” says Secretary of the Air Force Michael W. Wynne. “At some time in the future, they will simply rust out, age-out, [or] fall out of the sky.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the secretary’s words have proved prophetic, as this has already started to happen. In November 2007, the in-flight disintegration of an F-15 fighter aircraft led to the grounding of the entire F-15 fleet for a short time, and it appears that a sizable portion of that fleet may be grounded permanently.<sup>43</sup>

US Air Force senior leaders have taken drastic steps to turn the tide, including cutting thousands of Airmen in order to free up funds to recapitalize the fleet. To this point, their efforts have only slowed the rate of decline.<sup>44</sup> Secretary Wynne recently expressed his deep concern about the inability to turn things around, rhetorically asking, “What does that mean to an industrialist? It means you are going out of business. It is simply a matter of time.”<sup>45</sup> Operating in Iraq for several more years will only make things worse. Unless something changes, the United States is likely to have a “broken” air force before it finally leaves Iraq.

In addition to the risks to equipment, the drawdown asymmetry will also present new risks to coalition air bases. As often happens, a step taken to lessen the risk to one area will increase the risk in another, and this is the case in Iraq. Drawing down ground forces will have the effect of reducing the overall risk to coalition forces in Iraq. Major units will pull out of their small stations in the population centers and consolidate in large bases, and many will leave. The air units left in place will also help reduce the risk to the forces left behind, specifically the transition teams. As major units withdraw and forward operating bases are closed, however, extremists will view the main air bases left in Iraq as the most visible symbol of what they perceive as a US occupation of Muslim lands. They are likely to increase attacks on these bases using common methods of indirect fire such as mortars, rockets, and improvised explosive devices (IED). They are also likely to attack airplanes on departure and arrival because the runway orientation makes for predictable flight paths, and

aircraft are generally slower and more vulnerable at these times. Insurgents are able to obtain sophisticated weapons such as shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles, and they have used these weapons to attack coalition air assets repeatedly. Such incidents are likely to increase during the period of drawdown asymmetry.

The result is that force protection at the major air bases inside Iraq will grow in importance. This is a joint problem, as many of the major air bases left in Iraq will also be home to ground units that remain there. Dedicating sufficient forces to conduct air base ground defense can mitigate the risks, and it is probable that the best solution will include joint teams made up of Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps units. Specific force protection measures might include expanding the base perimeters and establishing secure areas beneath the departure and arrival corridors. One of the major air bases in Iraq, Balad Air Base, has a mature base protection scheme that may serve as a valuable model for joint cooperation in base defense.

In addition to these discrete risks to people and equipment, the drawdown asymmetry will also test the Air Force's ability to field certain high-value weapons systems that include both people and equipment. The challenges of no-fly-zone enforcement after the 1991 Gulf War forced major changes in the way the Air Force presents its forces for sustained use by combatant commanders. After a few painful years of haphazard deployments for its combat units, the service realized that it needed a change. It then adopted the air and space expeditionary force (AEF) structure. The entire Air Force was organized into 10 "buckets" (called AEFs), and each of those was placed on a schedule to deploy for four months out of every 20.<sup>46</sup> The new structure allowed a degree of professional and personal predictability for Airmen. Commanders knew how much time they had to rest and reconstitute their units before they were to deploy again, and individuals could make personal plans knowing that their schedules were relatively firm. Remarkably, the Air Force has adhered to the schedule for the most part, and it remains on schedule today. The result is that many of the deployment pains that come with ongoing operations are now bearable. Air Force people are tired, no doubt, but this tiredness is more chronic in nature (the result of multiple short-term deployments over 17 years) versus the acute issues that many in the US Army and Marine Corps are now experiencing. This success story is a main reason why the drawdown asymmetry is even an option. The US Air Force is unique among the world's air forces in

its ability to sustain major air operations halfway around the world for years at a time.

The AEF concept did not ease the stress on all weapons systems in the Air Force, however, and the drawdown asymmetry will expose weaknesses in the ability to sustain certain specialized capabilities. There are enough of certain types of air units (fighter units, for example) to be comfortably divided into the 10 AEFs. Unfortunately, this is not true of specialized systems such as ISR platforms or airborne command and control assets. These weapons systems bring capabilities that are very popular with ground commanders, and they are often referred to as high-demand, low-density (HD/LD) systems. Many of these systems began surging long before the current strategy was put into place, and some are on the verge of breakdown. Due to the high demand for their capabilities, the Air Force has curtailed training programs for the aircrews that operate systems like the E-8 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) because almost all of the airframes capable of flying are in the Middle East. Consequently, JSTARS crews are constantly away from home, and there are no fresh crews to help ease their load. Air Force leaders refer to this phenomenon as “busting the pipeline,” and it will lead to major problems for these systems in the future. Just as the surge in ground forces is unsustainable over the long run, the same is true for many of the HD/LD systems. While many air units will stay in place, some of the HD/LD units will have to come home, and leaders must find ways to decrease the demand for their capabilities or do without them altogether. Otherwise, these capabilities will not be available for other dangerous contingencies around the world.

This leads to a discussion about one more important risk brought about by the drawdown asymmetry. There is an opportunity cost to pay for a high level of commitment in Iraq for two decades or more. Just as the United States incurs risks to its interests in other parts of the world when its ground forces are overcommitted in Iraq, it will also run similar risks as it continues to operate air forces in Iraq for many years. Stated simply, air forces that are “spent” in Iraq will not be available to answer the call in other areas of the world. One example is air refueling. The most important capability that separates the US Air Force from the rest of the world’s modern air forces is its ability to project power over tremendous distances and maintain persistence over the battlespace for long periods. This is only possible through air refueling. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan require air-refueling aircraft to fly at a very high rate, and this is taking a toll on

the fleet. For many reasons, unfortunately, the replacement to the KC-135 tanker (the workhorse of the fleet) will be delayed. In the meantime, these aircraft will continue their high pace of operations, and this increases the probability that they will become unsafe and require grounding before their replacements arrive. Almost every conceivable contingency throughout the world that calls for airpower solutions will require significant air-refueling capacity, and the drawdown asymmetry will increase the risk that it will not be there when needed.

The same is true for aircraft that specialize in electronic warfare. These HD/LD aircraft—many of which the US Navy and Marine Corps own—have been surging in Iraq and Afghanistan for years as they play a key role in defending soldiers and Marines from IEDs. Unfortunately, many of these aircraft systems are on the brink. If the United States burns these systems out now, it cannot count on them to fulfill the important roles they play in major contingency operations. Without these aircraft operating at full capacity, the United States will be at a major disadvantage when the need arises to penetrate a modern air defense system or support a major ground operation.

These examples show that the most dangerous consequence of the drawdown asymmetry is the risk it poses to a major contingency elsewhere. The continued investment in the irregular warfare of Iraq may pay off one day in the attainment of coalition objectives there, although many believe this is unlikely. It is sure, however, to come at a significant cost to the ability to participate in a traditional conflict in the medium term, should it become necessary.

## **Opportunities**

While the risks discussed above are serious, the drawdown asymmetry offers several opportunities as well. The challenge is to relieve pressure on ground forces without abandoning Iraq.

Primarily, the drawdown offers the opportunity to extract ground forces from Iraq while leaving reduced forces in place to mitigate some of the less desirable occurrences. This will allow ground forces an opportunity for recovery as well as limit the exposure of coalition men and women to daily combat risks such as IEDs and other lethal attacks. In this way, the drawdown asymmetry and the resulting force posture may allow the coalition to realize some of its interests in Iraq at much less risk and cost

in terms of lives. It may even help instigate progress by forcing Iraqis to assume many of the burdens that coalition ground forces shoulder today. A ground force of five BCTs will look a lot less like an occupation to the citizens of Iraq than one comprised of 20 BCTs, and this may be helpful as well.

## **What Is the Future Role of Airpower in Iraq?**

In analyzing the possibilities, three questions need answers: What are the limits of airpower in Iraq? What things can airpower accomplish? What might airpower be able to accomplish?

### **What Airpower Cannot Do**

In framing the discussion, leaders must realize that there are four broad categories of things that airpower cannot do, and the first is that it cannot win a counterinsurgency. Alone, airpower cannot defeat the multiple groups of insurgents in Iraq, but this is true of ground power as well. Military power cannot win a counterinsurgency struggle. It takes the skilled application of all forms of state power to meet the needs of the population in question, thereby increasing the government’s legitimacy and undercutting the insurgent’s strategy. The primary need of the population is security, however, and this is where military power, including airpower, is essential.

Second, airpower cannot contain a spread in sectarian violence. There is a real danger that the sectarian violence that has gripped portions of Iraq could spread both within the country and beyond its borders. This could be especially troubling for some US allies in the region, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, which have significant Shia minorities. Airpower, in isolation, cannot stop this expansion if it begins—although as is discussed later, it may be able to mitigate some of the worst manifestations of this, including the discouraging of large formations of armed militia.

A third limitation of airpower is that it cannot act as a direct substitute for ground forces. In parts of Iraq, people perceive airpower as distant, impersonal, and frightening to citizens on the ground, especially those who have endured attacks on their families and tribes. Airpower cannot offer the visible, personal presence that a soldier on the ground provides. When assuming a policing role in a populated area, ground forces reassure innocent people and deter potential enemies in a way that air forces cannot.

Finally, airpower cannot stop illegal border crossings into Iraq. Airpower can offer several valuable capabilities to help prevent and deter the flow of people, money, supplies, and weapons in support of insurgent operations, including persistent ISR and precision strike. It cannot stop this activity, however. The main reason is that, while airpower is particularly good at detecting suspicious activity in the rural areas between border stations, the majority of the illegal activity enters Iraq through legal checkpoints. So far, neither airpower nor coalition ground forces nor the Iraqi Border Police have been able to stop these critical supply networks.

## **What Airpower Can Do**

Fortunately for the coalition, there are several benefits that airpower can offer in the context of Iraq. Although the threat of surface-to-air fire from insurgents is real, the coalition enjoys relatively free access to the airspace over Iraq while the insurgents have no access. This affords the coalition an important asymmetric advantage in ongoing operations. The coalition can exploit this advantage by using airpower to accomplish its objectives in five key ways. First, airpower can increase the capability of and decrease the risk to remaining coalition forces. Airpower makes ground forces much more effective while mitigating the worst dangers they could face by allowing them to move faster, travel lighter, maintain awareness, and employ accurate firepower when they encounter the enemy. When fully integrated with airpower, ground forces can devote fewer resources to specific missions while maintaining levels of risk that are acceptable.

In addition to increasing the capability of friendly forces, airpower can prevent the enemy from adopting tactics that require the massing of forces. Airpower in general, and the US Air Force in particular, are well suited to find, fix, and finish massed forces, including both stationary and mobile forces. While this may not seem especially relevant to the current situation in Iraq, it is important to remember the options that airpower denies to potential adversaries because they cannot gather their forces. The enemy employs guerilla tactics because it has no better alternative. If it could mass forces, it would, as this would increase the likelihood of accomplishing its objectives. Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan established numerous bases in the 1990s to help build its capabilities. Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia has never enjoyed the luxury of major bases because they would not survive, and this has hindered its ability to train and operate. Because the insurgents cannot mass their forces, they are in a perpetual state of stagnation.

In writings that remain widely studied today, Mao Tse-tung asserts that a combination of regular and guerilla forces is essential to ultimate victory in an insurgency. In *On Guerilla Warfare*, he explains:

The concept that guerilla warfare is an end in itself and that guerilla activities can be divorced from those of the regular forces is incorrect. If we assume that guerilla warfare does not progress from beginning to end beyond its elementary forms, we have failed to recognize the fact that guerilla hostilities can, under specific conditions, develop and assume orthodox characteristics. An opinion that admits the existence of guerilla war, but isolates it, is one that does not properly estimate the potentialities of such war.<sup>47</sup>

An insurgency cannot reach its full potential without regular forces. While al-Qaeda continues to desire an Islamic caliphate, it can never establish one without developing and massing these regular forces, and this will not happen as long as airpower stands in the way.

A third way that airpower contributes to coalition objectives is to deter regional adversaries from conventional military operations. The long-term presence of coalition air forces in Iraq can provide a credible deterrent against a potential conventional operation such as an invasion. As was stated earlier, Iraq's neighbors have many reasons to extend their influence into the country. Iraq's military forces are not yet a viable deterrent. Coalition forces, including those stationed both inside Iraq and throughout the Middle East, must stand in this gap until the balance of power is restored through a credible Iraqi military. Coalition air forces will be able to hold any conventional attack at great risk, even if ground forces draw down to low levels.

While deterring conventional attack is essential to long-term stability in the Middle East, airpower can also promote worldwide stability and security by striking terrorist targets if necessary. Airpower also offers the ability to hold terrorist targets at risk anywhere on the globe. The air forces that remain in place will ensure valuable options for combating terrorism through the air, including the ability to strike targets quickly within Iraq and throughout the region if necessary. This would be especially important in a time-critical scenario involving the perilous nexus between terrorist organizations and weapons of mass destruction. If the United States obtains information about the possibility of terrorists acquiring these weapons, and decision makers conclude that military force is necessary to prevent it, air forces in theater can provide a speedy alternative to a long-range strike.

While applying military power directly against terrorists remains an important option for the coalition, airpower can also produce positive effects, including promoting the legitimacy of the Iraqi government through the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Airpower can be a powerful tool in building confidence and goodwill among the population by providing nonlethal effects such as delivering critical supplies, especially in emergencies. It can also do this by evacuating wounded and sick civilians to capable treatment facilities. While coalition forces are capable of performing these actions on their own, it is much more effective to accomplish them in partnership with the Iraqi government. In addition, airpower can contribute in unique ways to Iraq's prosperity by promoting economic development through transportation and industry as well as sparking interest among Iraqi citizens in science and technology.

### **What Airpower Might Be Able to Do**

In considering options for the coalition and its use of airpower, there are several beneficial roles that airpower could play, but these roles are controversial and represent significant departures from the status quo. First, air units can partner with Iraqi air units in a mentoring role. The air units that stay in Iraq can serve as mentors for Iraqi air force units as they pursue operational status. Until now, frontline air units in Iraq have not engaged in the training mission. They have concentrated on their own demanding mission sets, and the Iraqi air force has not yet matured to a point where partnership would be helpful. As the Iraqi air force develops, however, coalition air units can be partnered with sister units in the Iraqi air force to form a constructive relationship. This will be especially appropriate as the Iraqi air force fields units that have similar missions to coalition air forces in Iraq, such as airlift and CAS. Coalition ground forces have enjoyed success with a similar initiative, as conventional units assigned to Multi-National Corps-Iraq, not MNSTC-I, have partnered directly with Iraqi army units, and both have benefited from the relationship.<sup>48</sup> As air units are likely to remain in place for several years, they will have the time necessary to build the personal relationships and trust that is critical to effective cooperation. Although coalition air units are not specifically trained in the intricacies of building a foreign air force, they are comprised of bright, professional airmen with considerable experience in their fields. With solid leadership, these airmen can overcome the culture and language barriers to be effective mentors. In addition, Iraqi airmen bring

invaluable knowledge of the human terrain that could be of great benefit to coalition units. The long-term partnering of Iraqi and coalition air units appears to be a win-win scenario, but it will require a deliberate effort to make mentoring a major part of airmen’s duties while deployed to Iraq.

Another controversial role for airpower is that it can enable a ground-force posture more conducive to long-term success. The presence of American troops on the ground in Iraq elicits a variety of responses from the Iraqi people. The soldiers reassure some, but others resent them. In many areas of Iraq, the visible presence of US troops is inflammatory. Islamic extremists portray the large numbers of coalition ground forces as a military occupation, and they use the resulting outrage in Muslim communities to help them recruit followers.<sup>49</sup> For these reasons, a drawdown that results in less visibility for coalition ground forces can be beneficial, and airpower can play a major role in ensuring that the forces remaining behind are able to protect the Iraqi government and coalition interests in the region. While airpower cannot serve as a direct substitute for ground troops, it can provide capabilities that enable a very different force posture—with a greatly reduced number of ground troops—while still remaining viable as a combined force. In short, airpower may make a long-term commitment possible with a force in Iraq that is sustainable at lower cost and risk.

A third controversial role for airpower is that it can project coalition military power to areas where there is limited or no ground presence. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, there are significant areas with no coalition ground presence. Some of these areas have become sanctuaries for the enemy. Airpower has the ability to challenge these sanctuaries in order to make it more difficult for insurgents to challenge the coalition and Iraqi government. When necessary, air forces can deliver precise lethal effects into these safe havens. The greatest “growth industry” in airpower’s contribution to irregular warfare, however, is the skillful combination of information operations and air presence to produce disruptive effects without “going kinetic.” Over the past year, coalition strategists have designed operations to communicate threatening messages to insurgents and reassuring messages to local populations in these safe havens through a combination of broadcast messages, leaflets, and airborne shows of force. For the latter, aircraft are flown in ways designed to communicate different messages. A low-altitude flyby over a known insurgent compound at just under the speed of sound conveys an entirely different message than a medium-altitude holding pattern over a populated area, but both can be ex-

tremely effective. The goal is to disrupt enemy activities to the point where they have difficulty projecting power into the major population centers. An interesting development in recent military thought has been a lack of appreciation for battlefield depth in counterinsurgency. It is possible that airpower can conduct operations in the deep areas of the battlespace to help create numerous benefits in close areas like Baghdad, Fallujah, and Basra, but it will require commanders to release air assets from the very tight leash of control that they are on today.

A fourth possibility for coalition airpower is that it can directly support Iraqi units in the fight against the common enemy. Although this is not happening today, it is possible that coalition airpower can work directly with Iraqi ground units to make them more effective. This has been a controversial subject among Airmen. While every Airman realizes the importance of helping the Iraqi army units secure their own country, they are understandably wary of providing direct support to the Iraqis for three key reasons. First, the forces in-theater are sized to support coalition ground forces, and meeting the requests and requirements levied by the ground units is extremely challenging. Adding support requirements from Iraqi units would be a tremendous burden, as many types of air support are fully spoken for now. Second, the Iraqi units do not have the technical training and experience to interface directly with coalition air units. Not only are there language and cultural barriers to communications, but there are also many required skill sets that Iraqis do not possess. For example, there are no Iraqi joint tactical air controllers (JTAC). These skilled operators are the key links between coalition ground units and airpower, but no Iraqis are in training to accomplish this role. Finally, there is a real fear that Iraqis could use airpower to do things that would not be consistent with coalition objectives. While the Iraqi military contains many professional commanders, it is possible, if not probable, that some of the less professional commanders would use airpower to silence their enemies or exact revenge. For these reasons, the coalition provides airpower support, in its lethal and nonlethal forms, through personnel embedded in the transition teams. These team members act to check each request for airpower. The day is approaching, however, when providing direct support to Iraqi ground units will seem attractive to the United States and other coalition partners. Depending on the situation, this may be appropriate, but it will require that Iraqis receive the technical training necessary for successful

cooperation. It will also require a relationship built on mutual respect and trust that comes from years of fighting a common enemy.

Perhaps the most vital—and the least discussed—role that coalition air-power can play in the coming years is to dissuade Iran and Israel from air attacks against each other. The most direct path between Israel and the highest priority targets in Iran is through Iraqi airspace. Having the world’s most capable air forces operating day and night in this airspace provides one more reason for Iran and Israel to refrain from launching direct attacks on each other. This benefits all parties in the Middle East and beyond, as a confrontation between Israel and Iran has the potential to disintegrate into bloodshed throughout the region and, even worse, trigger the exchange of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.

## **Further Questions**

As leaders consider what the drawdown asymmetry will mean for Iraq, the Middle East, and the coalition, several questions remain. The answers will shape the nature of the continued presence of coalition forces in Iraq as well as determine the residual capabilities of the combined force. Each of these questions deserves further thought and discussion.

### **Will US Navy Aviation Assets Continue to Fly in Iraq?**

The US Navy has been a vital partner in the overall coalition air effort. Electronic attack aircraft have been stationed in Iraq continuously, and many more aircraft—including strike, ISR, and command and control assets—have flown from land bases in Iraq and aircraft carriers operating in the Arabian Gulf. If US Navy assets continue to fly in Iraq, it will help attenuate the burden placed on the US Air Force by the drawdown asymmetry.

### **Will Coalition Air Forces Continue to Fly in Iraq?**

Other countries in the coalition have made significant contributions to the air effort. The Royal Air Force, for example, has played a major role in air operations by providing air transport, ISR, and strike support. If coalition air forces stay in place, they will continue to ease the burden on US air units.

## **Will US Army Aviation Assets Remain Behind?**

The US Army has deployed a large amount of air assets to Iraq, including a combat aviation brigade that contains scores of capable attack helicopters. Army units also employ large numbers of unmanned aerial systems. If these assets remain in Iraq, they will provide many important air capabilities.

## **Will Marine Air Assets Remain in Iraq? If So, Who Will Task Them?**

While Marine electronic attack assets fly in support of the coalition ground forces and receive their tasking from the combined force air component commander, Marine attack and air refueling assets are limited to flying in support of troops in the Multi-National Force-West area of operations. The vast majority of the forces they support are, unsurprisingly, Marines. It is reasonable, given the history of the Marine Corps, to assume that these assets will stay while Marines are on the ground, but it remains an open question what they will do if the Marine expeditionary force leaves Iraq.

## **Will Other States Help to Build the Iraqi Air Force?**

The United States has borne the lion's share of responsibilities in building and training the Iraqi air force, but this does not have to be the case. Many of the world's successful air forces, including several in the Middle East, have capabilities and experiences that can be extremely useful in this effort. Will the United States ask for help, and if so, will other countries respond positively?

## **Will Iraq Devote the Resources Necessary to Have a Full-Spectrum Air Force?**

Ultimately, the Iraqis must devote the resources necessary for an air force capable of the spectrum of missions required of a regional power in the Middle East. Air forces are expensive, and resources in Iraq are scarce. It remains to be seen whether Iraqi politicians will make the commitments necessary to build a strong air force.

## **Will the United States Devote the Resources Necessary to Maintain Its Dominant Air Forces?**

It is ironic that the United States is planning an increase in the total force levels of the Army and Marine Corps, yet these increases will take effect as these services leave Iraq in large numbers. In the meantime, the air units of the Navy and Air Force will continue their engagement in Iraq for years. This continued commitment will threaten the viability of US air forces, and it remains to be seen if the administration and Congress take action to reconstitute the air forces that will continue to be “spent” in Iraq in the same way that they are allocating resources to ground forces that will be disengaging from the conflict there.

### **A Drawdown Asymmetry for Years to Come**

These questions illustrate some of the uncertainty surrounding the future of Iraq. All indications are, however, that many ground units will redeploy without replacement in the near future, but air units will stay behind to accomplish two functions. First, they will support and protect the ground forces that remain, especially the transition teams. Second, they will control and defend Iraq’s sovereign airspace while the Iraqi air force matures. This drawdown asymmetry brings significant risks and opportunities to coalition policies in Iraq. The greatest opportunity is the promise that the coalition can still pursue long-term objectives in Iraq while allowing ground forces a crucial recovery period, but doing so will require an acceptance of risk to the well-being of coalition air forces, especially the US Air Force. In the end, the burden will fall on the Airmen, many of whom have been deploying regularly to the Middle East since the fall of 1990 and will serve their entire careers in a force engaged in the skies over Iraq. **SSQ**

#### **Notes**

1. As an example, Gen Anthony Zinni, USMC, retired, commented on the surge: “Increasing the number of troops is not a strategy, it’s a tactic. The administration is getting off the hook for something they haven’t had in five years, which is a strategy for Iraq.” Alex Spillius, “General Zinni Attacks Lack of Strategy in Iraq,” *UK Telegraph*, 4 September 2007.

2. David Kilcullen, a key advisor to Gen David H. Petraeus, top military commander in Iraq, writes, “The key element in the plan, as outlined in the President’s speech, is to concentrate security forces within Baghdad, to secure the local people where they live. Troops will operate in small, local groups closely partnered with Iraqi military and police units, with each unit permanently

assigned to an area and working its beat. This is different from early strategies which were enemy-centric (focusing on killing insurgents), or the more recent approaches that relied on training and supporting Iraqi forces and expected them to secure the population.” Kilcullen, “Don’t Confuse the ‘Surge’ with the Strategy,” *Small Wars Journal*, 19 January 2007, <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/01/dont-confuse-the-surge-with-th>.

3. In the months following the president’s announcement of the surge, the Marine Corps fielded another Marine expeditionary unit, the Navy committed an additional aircraft carrier and support vessels to the region, and the Air Force sent additional fighter, electronic warfare, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft.

4. This common description of the surge is interesting for at least two reasons. First, by focusing on Army ground units, it fails to acknowledge the other forms of combat power that have surged. Second, it represents a major sign that the Army’s transformation plan is working, as a major goal of that plan is to move from a force where the primary unit of combat power is the division (approximately 12,000 soldiers) to one that is more “modular” by focusing on the smaller brigade combat team (approximately 3,000–4,000 soldiers).

5. This is especially true after General Petraeus, commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, declined to make recommendations for drawdown past July of 2008. In his September testimony, he stated:

In fact, later this month, the Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed as part of the surge will depart Iraq. Beyond that, if my recommendations are approved, that unit’s departure will be followed by the withdrawal of a brigade combat team without replacement in mid-December and the further redeployment without replacement of four other brigade combat teams and the two surge Marine battalions in the first 7 months of 2008, until we reach the pre-surge level of 15 brigade combat teams by mid-July 2008. I would also like to discuss the period beyond next summer. Force reductions *will* continue beyond the pre-surge levels of brigade combat teams that we will reach by mid-July 2008; however, in my professional judgment, it would be premature to make recommendations on the pace of such reductions at this time. (emphasis added)

House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees, *Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq*, prepared by Gen David H. Petraeus, commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq, 10–11 September 2007, <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/pet091007.pdf>.

6. As Graham Allison and Kevin Ryan write, “What all of this debate about withdrawal missed, however, is that the driver is not conditions in Iraq or politics in the United States but the hard realities of Army and Marine Corps readiness. As the troops’ extended 15-month tours of duty end, the Army and Marine Corps simply don’t have more troops to replace them. The withdrawal will be, in effect, the flip side of the surge.” Graham Allison and Kevin Ryan, “No Choice—Withdrawal Starts in ’08,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 2007.

7. For example, Thomas White, Secretary of the Army from 2001 to 2003, answered the question, “Is the Army broken?” in this way: “Yeah, I think so. We’re on the brink. We are in a situation where we are grossly overdeployed, and it is unlike any other period in the 229-year history of the Army. We have never conducted a sustained combat operation with a volunteer force, with a force that we have to compete in the job market to hire every year. Every other force that we’ve ever done this with, going back to the Vietnam period to something comparable, has been a draftee conscript force. So what we are all worried about is that the manpower situation will come unglued.” Thomas White, interview, *Frontline*, 12 August 2004, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/pentagon/interviews/white.html>. Col Douglas McGregor, author of the book *Breaking the Phalanx*, gave this answer: “I think it is. I think it is, absolutely. The stop losses are symptomatic of it. People inside the force are very frustrated and very unhappy. The 12-month tours are a catastrophe. No one wants to

enlist to do that sort of work." Douglas McGregor, interview, *Frontline*, 23 July 2004, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/pentagon/interviews/macgregor.html>.

8. Gen Barry R. McCaffrey, USA, retired, adjunct professor of international affairs, US Military Academy, to Col Michael Meese, professor and head, Department of Social Sciences, memorandum, "After Action Report: Visit Iraq and Kuwait, 9–16 March 2007," 26 March 2007, [http://usnews.com/usnews/images/blogs/news\\_blog/AARMc CaffreyIraq0326071.pdf](http://usnews.com/usnews/images/blogs/news_blog/AARMc CaffreyIraq0326071.pdf).

9. Hart Seely, "10th Mountain Commander: We're Tired," *Syracuse Post-Standard*, 18 September 2007.

10. As General Petraeus wrote in a letter to the people of Multi-National Force-Iraq, "One of the justifications for the surge, after all, was that it would help create the space for Iraqi leaders to tackle the tough questions and agree on key pieces of 'national reconciliation' legislation. It has not worked out as we had hoped. All participants, Iraqi and coalition alike, are dissatisfied by the halting progress on major legislative initiatives such as the oil framework law, revenue sharing, and de-ba'athification reform." Gen David H. Petraeus, commander, Multi-National Force-Iraq, "Commanding General's September Message [to the] Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Civilians of Multi-National Force-Iraq," 7 September 2007, [http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=14089&Itemid=176](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14089&Itemid=176).

11. For two interesting discussions of the limitations of a rapid withdrawal, see Deborah Gage and Kim S. Nash, "How to Leave Iraq," *Baseline*, 28 August 2007; and Lawrence J. Korb et al., *How to Redeploy: Implementing a Responsible Drawdown of U.S. Forces from Iraq* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress), September 2007.

12. House Committees, *Report to Congress*.

13. Rep. Alan Putnam of Florida writes, "It would be reckless, then, for us to walk away from Iraq and hand over to al Qaeda and its radical militant Islamist associates a strategic base where they can consolidate their gains, train their newest recruits and plan fresh attacks on Americans." "The Risks of Running Away," *New York Post*, 14 September 2007.

14. House Committees, *Report to Congress*.

15. Energy Information Administration, "Crude Oil and Petroleum Imports: Top 15 Countries," December 2007 Import Highlights: 3 March 2008, [http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil\\_gas/petroleum/data\\_publications/company\\_level\\_imports/current/import.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/company_level_imports/current/import.html).

16. Margaret Coker, "Navy Protects Iraq's Lifeline in Persian Gulf," *Boston Globe*, 16 October 2007.

17. International Energy Agency, *Oil Market Report*, 11 October 2007, 18, <http://omrpublic.iea.org/currentissues/full.pdf>.

18. James Dobbins, "The Right Way to Withdraw," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 2007.

19. Anthony H. Cordesman, "One More Year in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 2007.

20. Gordon Lubold, "In Iraq, A Veteran Marine Gunner Sees a War to be Won," *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 October 2007.

21. For an enlightening discussion of the importance of analogies in wartime decision making, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also the classic discussion of "How Decision-Makers Learn" in Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 217–82.

22. This perception has been strengthened by the influential book *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* by Lewis Sorley (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999). In this book, Sorley argues that Gen Creighton Abrams's approach to the war had all but attained victory, but the premature disengagement of US forces snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Many military officers have studied this work.

23. Thomas E. Ricks, "Pentagon May Suggest Short-Term Buildup Leading to Iraq Exit," *Washington Post*, 20 November 2007.
24. House Committees, *Report to Congress*.
25. Chris Collins, "Troops in Iraq Try Team Strategy," *Fresno Bee*, 16 September 2007.
26. Sgt Shannon Crane, USA, "Military Transition Teams Embed with Iraqi Security," *Defend America*, 23 April 2007, <http://www.defendamerica.mil/articles/apr2007/a042307ls1.html>.
27. Capt Jared R. Kite, Maj Christopher L. Matson, and Lt Col Richard A. McConnell, "So You're Going to Be on a MiTT: What Do You Need to Know?" *Field Artillery*, November/December 2006.
28. Lt Col Richard A. McConnell, Maj Christopher L. Matson, and Capt Brent A. Clemmer, "The MiTT and Its 'Human Terrain': Transitioning the Iraqi Army into the Lead," *Field Artillery*, January/February 2007.
29. Ibid.
30. The transition team Web site is <http://www.riley.army.mil/units/trainingteam.aspx>.
31. The US Army and Marine Corps' field manual for counterinsurgency operations states, "Intelligence drives operations and successful operations generate additional intelligence." US Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 15 December 2006, 3-25.
32. FM 3-24 describes it this way, "Effective COIN operations are decentralized, and higher commanders owe it to their subordinates to push as many capabilities as possible down to their level" (*ibid.*, 1-26). It also states, "Effective operations are shaped by timely, specific, and reliable intelligence, gathered and analyzed at the lowest possible level and disseminated throughout the force" (*ibid.*, 1-23).
33. John A. Tirpak, "The Big Squeeze," *Air Force Magazine* 90, no. 10 (October 2007): 34–37, <http://www.afa.org/magazine/oct2007/1007squeeze.pdf>.
34. Maj Damien Pickart, "Kingpin Orchestrates Airpower Symphony over Iraq," *Air Force Print News Today*, 13 March 2007, [http://www.33fw.acc.af.mil/news/story\\_print.asp?id=123044495](http://www.33fw.acc.af.mil/news/story_print.asp?id=123044495). The Marine Corps has also deployed air control personnel and assets, but as is discussed later, they may leave if and when the Marine expeditionary force withdraws from Iraq.
35. "Iraq Condemns Turkish Airstrikes," CBS News/Associated Press, 17 December 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/12/17/iraq/main3626770.shtml>.
36. Jamie Haig, "6th SOS [Special Operations Squadron]," *Special Operations Technology* 4, no. 7 (10 October 2006), <http://www.special-operations-technology.com/article.cfm?DocID=1698>.
37. The MNSTC-I Web site is <http://www.mnstci.iraq.centcom.mil>.
38. In fact, the CAFTT did not make use of the extensive expertise of USAF Special Operations Command forces until 2005. When they were brought in, the 6th SOS found out that "the Iraqi Air Force did not have anything in the way of training plans, operating instructions or standard operating procedures." Haig, "6th SOS."
39. Gen James L. Jones, USMC, retired, chairman, et al., *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 September 2007), 72, <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/isf.pdf>. To aid in comparison, there were over 145,000 counted in the Iraqi security forces in June of 2004. Michael E. O'Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables in Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1 October 2007), 34, <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf>.
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